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Reagan keeps thumb on Sandinistas with troop exercises

By Jeremiah O'Leary
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President Reagan has issued a formal directive ordering the Pentagon to resume military and naval exercises in Honduras and off the coasts of Central America in view of the continuing military buildup in Nicaragua, sustained Sandinista support for the rebels in El Salvador and the expected rebel offensive there in September, The Washington Times has learned.

"We don't want our allies in Central America to start jumping ship because of erroneous reports that the U.S. is seeking a direct accommodation with Managua," said an informed administration source. "The Nicaraguans would love to have a separate deal because it would weaken us with our friends in Central America." He acknowledged that the other Central Americans are shaky because of the perception that the United States may not stick to the course charted by President Reagan.

There may be some disagreement at lower staff levels but there is no disagreement among top policy levels that it would be a major mistake to negotiate a separate deal with Nicaragua," an administration official said yesterday.

The president issued a three-part directive after a meeting of all senior security officials June 26 at which Special Ambassador Harry Shlaudeman reported on the state of affairs in the Central American arena. All the president's senior advisers, including Secretary of State George P. Shultz, Defense Secretary Casper W. Weinberger, CIA chief William J. Casey, national security advisor Robert C. McFarlane and U.N. Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick, agreed with President Reagan on his directive.

The president ordered:

- Continued dialogue with Nicaragua within the framework of the Contadora group and adhering to the four basic U.S. objectives regarding the Sandinista regime.
- All-out support by all agencies for achieving congressional and public support for the administration's proposals for funding the Jackson Plan for Central America and specifically the $21 million in funds for the anti-Sandinista contras and the remaining $116 million the president wants Congress to appropriate in the regular supplemental bill for aid to El Salvador.

The president already has signed the $62 million urgent supplemental legislation for support of El Salvador.

The Pentagon a week ago reacted to this directive by ordering a resumption of low-level military and naval exercises to begin before the expected Salvadoran rebel offensive. This represents a major policy change and senior officials said the resumption of U.S. exercises was designed to demonstrate the firm American commitment to its friends and allies in the region. Informed sources said the exercises will be small-unit maneuvers of short duration, stepped-up security assistance to the allies in Central America, increased intelligence efforts about the Nicaraguan military buildup and a naval presence offshore that officials would not discuss in detail.

The primary reasons for this high-level decision were the expected fall offensive by the Marxist forces in El Salvador, the apprehension in Costa Rica, which has no army, and the nervousness in Honduras where there are 15,000 anti-Sandinistas whose future financing is in the hands of Congress when members return to Washington July 23.

In issuing the directive, Mr. Reagan emphasized that U.S. objectives remain the same. They are: that Nicaragua must cease exporting arms and advisers to the Salvadoran insurgents; that Nicaragua must reduce the size of its relatively huge military machine; that Nicaragua must cut its ties with the Soviet Union and Cuba; and that Nicaragua must adhere to its promise to the Organization of American States to conduct free elections.

Despite reports of a bitter battle within the administration about whether the United States should make a separate deal with Nicaragua giving the Sandinistas a free hand internally in return for an agreement to cease helping the leftists in El Salvador, there is a solid front against such an accommodation among the president and all senior officials.

Members of Congress were given a 35-page classified report recently which states that Nicaraguan aid to the Salvadoran rebels continues unabated. The report states that the Nicaraguans have completed the longest runway in Central America at Punta Huete as well as lengthened the airfields at Bluefields and Puerto Cabezas; that Bulgarian ships are bringing a continous flow of weapons to Nicaragua including 120 Soviet tanks, some of them amphibious, 120 armored vehicles, 120 Soviet howitzers, 24 multiple rocket launchers made in the U.S.S.R., 1,000 trucks and jeeps and 10 Soviet helicopters.

Nicaragua also has been given six heavy ferry boats for river crossings. The current estimate of intelligence sources is that there are in Nicaragua 3,000 Cuban civilians, 200 Soviet officials and hundreds of military and civilian advisers from eastern European countries, Libya, North Korea and the Palestine Liberation Organization. The Sandinista strategy, according to the report, continues to be to exercise command, control and training for the Salvadoran rebels and to foment violence in Costa Rica.

The administration is now looking for a means of securing congressional authority for the $21 million for the contras, perhaps by attaching it to another appropriations bill, and for the rest of the military assistance funds for the government of President Jose Napoleon Duarte.

"If we don't get the whole package, the Jackson Plan [developed by the Kissinger Commission] for Central America will wind up in the dead letter office," an administration official said yesterday. The White House expects Senate approval but believes that the Central American legislation is in trouble in the Democrat-dominated House of Representatives.

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